



International Journal of Economic Research

ISSN : 0972-9380

available at <http://www.serialsjournal.com>

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Volume 14 • Number 12 • 2017

The Woman's Perspective of 'His-story' in Anchee Min's "The Empress Orchid"

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Abstract: The novel Empress Orchid by Anchee Min is a remarkable chronicle of a young concubine who enhances into China's last Empress. The Empress Tzu Hsi, identified as Orchid elevates herself as the Empress of China through her intelligence in governance, political diplomacy and outstanding courage that holds the politically disintegrating China together. However in Chinese history she is crowned responsible for the fall of the great Qing dynasty. Anchee Min through her spectacular ability in weaving the social history of China, constructs a new glorified image with authentic evidences to the downtrodden Empress of China. The Empress Orchid is distorted in the history of China as a ruthless dictator and incapable leader who was responsible for the misfortunes during the reign of Qing dynasty in China. Anchee Min in her novel "The Empress Orchid" rewrites the history of China during the pre-colonial era. The Empress Orchid is distorted in the history of China as a ruthless dictator and worthless leader who was responsible for the misfortune in China and her name itself is enormously eliminated from the history of the Forbidden Kingdom. Anchee Min polishes Empress Orchid with rejuvenated glory and portrays the other side of the political events from the Empress's perspective that led to the fall of the dynasty. The Empress in the novel mortifies the glory of the Forbidden kingdom. Her views on the status of King's skill and her techniques on resolving social issues attribute not only to the change in the course of events on the contrary are also termed as the statement of reality. It is necessary to rewrite the history from the perspective of women since it is the essence that will enhance the future world. The paper discusses the general historical perceptions and the rewritten history in the perspective of woman.

INTRODUCTION

History, the recorded events of the past culture, tradition, societal values and conceptions is an amalgamation of the male gender perspective of the world that prevailed. It is eminent that the status, role, existence and

prevalence of empowered female personalities are comfortably and consciously evaded from the recorded past. Though included, the empowered females are constructed as witches and wickedest beings whose interferences toppled the once powerful dynasties that were ruled by glorious men in the past. Burton registers the fact that feminists identify history as not as something that happened in the past but more specifically the sections of knowledge about the past that we are made aware of. Therefore it becomes necessary to rewrite the past in order to reconstruct the false assumptions and to analyse the true repute of women in the “history.”

Anchee Min, a fearless and passionate writer made her first debut in the literary world with *Red Azalea* that reveals her memoir of growing up in China during the violent trauma of the Cultural Revolution. Anchee Min confesses that she learned at a very young age about the disavouring attitude of China towards women in general. In her writings unravels the position and role of Chinese women in China’s cultural, societal, political and religious regimes. Her earnest retelling of the history of Chinese women is a peep-hole through which the world identifies the other side of the empowered women leaders who are thrashed in the chauvinistic history as nothing but mere misfortune carriers. Chinese tradition teaches that “women are like grass, born to be stepped on.” Anchee Min in her works turns down these traditions and restores the women leaders of China their denied glory and recognition as eminent front-runners in the history of China.

Empress Orchid novel explores the life of Empress Orchid Yehonala. The novel begins with the life of the Empress as a young Manchu girl who recently lost her father. She is selected as the imperial consort of the fourth rank among the seven Imperial consorts and over three thousand concubines of the Forbidden City. Though fourth in rank she conquers the favourite Empress status in the heart of the Emperor Hsein Feng and remains as the only Empress who bears the Emperor a son. Empress Orchid reigns to the throne along with the Emperor of the Qing dynasty encounters the political tension of a poverty stricken China that is addicted to opium and engulfed with the fear of barbarians (westerners) conquering their country. Her ability to write and read Chinese and her profound knowledge and skill in governance, enables her to act behind the Emperor in executing proper political strategy to hold together. The novel explores the remarkable abilities of the Empress who paves herself a way to survive, administer and rule in the chauvinistic political system of China.

The author in her expedition of unravelling the truth about the disgraced Empress in the history attributes a new glory and respect to the Empress’s unrecognised endeavours to save the collapsing country. Anchee Min through the rewriting of the history of Empress Orchid enables the reader to identify the once glorified Kingdom in a women’s perspective. Through the narration by Empress Orchid, Anchee Min unfolds the chauvinistic political realm and the crumbling grandeur of the Forbidden Kingdom that hides behind the mere smokes of “God-enthroned” exaltations.

THE GENERAL HISTORY

Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) is stated as the last Empress in history of China who governed the nation. She was a Chinese Empress and also regent who through her profound skill and ability effectively influenced the government of China in the late Qing dynasty for about forty seven years. She was positioned in the sixth rank consorts and later was chosen as the fourth Imperial consort in 1854 and bore the Emperor the only surviving male child, Zaichun in 1855. During the Second Opium War the invasion of the French

and British troops to Beijing caused the Emperor along with his family and governors to leave Beijing. After the death of the Emperor in 1861, Empress Dowager Cixialong with other concubines were restored to the Forbidden Kingdom. It's during this phase of life the Empress's struggles were remarkable. She was pushed to a regime where she handles both the future Emperor of China and China itself. She and her son were surrounded by eight regent ministers who were appointed by the Emperor to direct and support the future emperor. It is said that the ministers led by the chief Su-Shun, refused to be ordained under the rule of a woman and denounced her constant interference in the political affairs of the state. Empress aligned herself with the brothers of the Emperor Hsein Feng: Prince Gong and Prince Chun. During this period she received a memorial from Shandong (a place that served as a pivotal cultural and religious site for Taoism, Chinese Buddhism, and Confucianism) implementing to her the idea to "listen to politics behind the curtain," i.e. to act as a de-facto ruler. It is during the funeral procession of the Emperor Hsein Feng, Empress Dowager along with her allied Princes plots the murder of the eight regent ministers appointed by the Emperor. These regent ministers were alleged with the charge of betraying the country to the foreigners and for their internal political discretion to overthrow the power of the Emperor Zaichun. The Empress remained the only ruler in the whole history of China to rule behind a curtain for about forty seven years. The fall of the Qing dynasty and modern reformations in the China were not well received by the chauvinistic cultural impended society. The Empress is described as the ruthless ruler whose ambitious nature destroyed the once most influential political regime of China.

THE RETOLD HISTORY

The novel *Empress Orchid* by Anchee Min is a remarkable story of a young concubine who enhances into China's most powerful woman in history. The Empress Tzu His, identified as Orchid elevates herself as the Empress of China through her intelligence in governance, political diplomacy and outstanding courage that holds China together. However in the History of China she is considered as the single woman accountable for the destruction of the great Qing dynasty. Anchee Min through her spectacular ability to weave the social history of China, constructs a new glorified image, with authentic resources that vindicate the acts of the Empress Orchid.

The novel begins with Orchid, a young Manchu whose recent loss of her father has pushed her family into poverty. She enrolls herself in the Selection of Imperial Consorts to escape from the poverty and the vicious plot of her uncle to marry her to his mentally retarded son, Ping. Though she had one in a million chance to attain the position of an Imperial consort yet her poverty and her refusal to give up to life's tragic ordinances enables her to pursue for a royal settlement.

Once selected as the fourth rank of Imperial consort, Orchid encounters the reality of survival as a concubine in the Forbidden Palace, the luxurious life in the Imperial palace came with a price. In the novel the author makes an earnest attempt in disclosing the actual status of the Empresses and concubines in the Forbidden Kingdom: "Women in China dreamed about becoming me without knowing my suffering. By identifying with the eunuchs, I tended my heart's wound. The eunuch's pain was written in their faces. They had been gelded and everyone understood their misfortune. But mine was hidden." (Empress Orchid, 174)

The novel is written in a first person narrative through Empress Orchid's perception. The paper discusses the portrayal of general historical perception and the rewritten history from the perspective of woman. The history rewritten in the perspective of a woman unveils the impoverished status and the

hypocritical exaltations of the glorious Forbidden Kingdom. Empress Orchid strips off the grandeur and mocks at the discernments instigated in the minds of the people regarding the kingdom. On illustrating the 2604 dragons on the ceiling of the Hall of Heavenly Harmony which claim to signify the 'Imperial glory', Anchee Min through the perspective of Empress Orchid whorecollecting the image of the dragons, says "When I sat on the throne and was the dragon, I was very much afraid that people would find out that there was nothing to the images." (Empress Orchid, 204).

Through Anchee Min's description of historical events in the Empress's perspective, she subtly criticizes the religious and political status offered to women in the country. It was ordained to every Empresses and concubines in the palace to decorate themselves with chosen make-ups, silk and extravagant hair styles, in case the Emperor should call. The life in Forbidden Kingdom is illustrated through the eyes of Empress Orchid as highly power structured hierarchal institution clouded in suffocating traditional practices. It is stated that the Empresses and concubines are expected to read poetry and indulge themselves in learning embroidery patterns. When Empress Orchid switches her interest from learning embroidery to political affairs she was utterly condemned and threatened for her interferences. Anchee Min portrays the rising tension between concubines and Empresses in achieving the goal of pleasing the Emperor. The destiny to achieve the intimacy of one man drives the concubines and Empresses to a status where murdering a fellow courtesan becomes a necessary. Nuharoo, the first in rank Empress Spies on Empress Orchid and condemns her for her improper role play in state affairs. Cloud, the spy appointed by Nuharoo barks at Empress Orchid as, "You'd better to think whose dog you are kicking! So what if I have been spying on you? You have been reading court documents instead of embroidery patterns!" (Empress Orchid, 165).

When Emperor in his failing health entreats Orchid's assistance in the affairs of the state, his advisers withsets her at every political events and eventually proceeds to have her buried alive. Through the novel Anchee Min describes the Imperial China under the governance of an incompetent Emperor and power drunk chauvinistic ministers. The male dominated administration is set in favour of age-old tradition and cultural practices than in the life of common people.

SIGNIFICANCE OF REWRITING HISTORY

The image of Empress Orchid through-out the history has been ruined to the extent where the young children in China learn her as a "master mind of pure evil and intrigue" and stated to be allegedly responsible for the fall of the glorious Qing dynasty. Anchee Min retells the story of Empress Orchid as a strong willed compulsive woman who is equipped with intense knowledge and wisdom.

The history of Empress Orchid is trotted and tossed in the hands of chauvinistic historians. Jasper Becker, a Chinese journalist portrays Empress Orchid as luxury lover whose "extravagant fripperies" on Imperial navy caused the defeat of China in the hands of Japan and the loss of Taiwan. The Empress's life records was forged by Edmund Backhouse, a charlatan foreign correspondent who represented her as a "psychopathic nymphomaniac." He described in his book *China Under The Empress Dowager* (1914) her lifestyle as an extravagance, her ideology as conservative and her political ordinances as ruthless cruelty against fellow aristocrats. However his records were considered as the typical "Confucian Chinese male view of history" which at all instances ricochets accusations for the prodigious political catastrophes on to women. Backhouse was then found guilty for forging few of the source materials utilized in his works. When Mao Zedong's wife, Jiang Qing was imprisoned in 1976 for exploitation of power, The Palace

Museum conducted an exhibit that showcased Cixi's luxurious goods in order to demonstrate that a woman ruler weakened a nation's stability.

Katherine Carl, an American painter who was invited by Empress Cixi to China to draw a portrait of her. Katherine Carl records her expedition to Forbidden Kingdom in her *With the Empress Dowager*. She describes the Empress as a woman with great presence and charm in spite of her shrewd character. Carl dignifies the Empress with a personality that seemed unusually attractive.

It was only during 1949 soon after the People Republic the representation of the Empress in the history appeared for a debate. By the mid-1970s, the perspective of the scholars changed. Sue Fawn Chung's "The Much Maligned Empress Dowager" opened with the sentence "Clio, the Muse of History, has not been kind" to Cixi. Pamela Kyle Crossley, an historian of the dynasty, illustrates the misshaping of the image of Empress Orchid as a mere representation obscured by "misogyny and orientalist stereotyping" along with the inclusion of anti-Manchu sentiment which was inevitably present in all Chinese narratives.

Anchee Min, however, enunciates the core purpose of her writing: "I could not let the lies be the only record. It scared me to think that my daughter would be studying false history, and I felt obligated to do something about it." Her concern was to rebuild the true stature of ruled women. For she considered it was a necessity to safeguard the future generation to not walk in the path of constructed lies.

CONCLUSION

Rewriting history from the perspective of the downtrodden enables us to view the other side of the past world. Anchee Min's mission was to educate the world about an Empress who was deliberately accused and blamed by the chauvinistic Chinese society. *Empress Orchid* is a historic fiction where the author uses historic facts as the basis for plot structure. Anchee Min confesses about her painstaking effort to read the original manuals and historic records of the Empress Orchid that was stored in a chemical treated storage of Ancient documents. Anchee Min paints new colour to the History of Empress Orchid through intensive research and justifies the Empress as a fitter women ruler whose regime extended for forty six years. The novel not only rewrites history but also wipes clean the stereotypical notions set for the women in China.

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